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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 RABAT 000280

SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: MOROCCO'S ROAD CARNAGE

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Sensitive but unclassified. Please protect accordingly.

¶1. (SBU) Summary: In spite of a multi-year national campaign initiated in 2004 to decrease road fatalities, Morocco suffered an increase in the number of killed and seriously injured in 2007, with on average, more than 10 people killed and 240 seriously injured on Moroccan roads each day. The carnage prompted the Minister of Transportation to announce a new road safety action plan at the end of February that includes legislation that would implement a new national road code. Although there is widespread outrage at the scope of the carnage, public support of the government's reform legislation is mixed and popular grass-roots efforts to curb the situation have yet to materialize. As one contact in the Foreign Ministry put it, "Moroccans drive the way they do because they can." End Summary.

The Grim Statistics

¶2. (U) In Morocco there were approximately 3,800 people killed in 2007, with 86,000 injured in 54,500 accidents. Given Morocco's estimated 2 million motor vehicles, this equates to a rate of 1,900 deaths per million vehicles, making Morocco one of the world's most dangerous countries. By comparison, California, which is approximately the same geographic size and population, has a rate of approximately 135 deaths per million vehicles.

¶3. (SBU) Econoff met with the Chief of Road Safety in the Transportation Ministry, Abdelhamid Janati Idrissi, to discuss Morocco's accident statistics and government initiatives. Urban areas account for the majority of accidents (70 percent), while rural settings account for the majority of fatalities (70 percent). Among the victims seriously injured or killed, 77 percent are male, 12 percent are less than 14 years old, and 31 percent are pedestrians. In addition to the human toll, Idrissi underlined the economic cost of Morocco's accidents, which the Ministry estimates to be 2.5 percent of GDP, about equal to the value of all U.S.-Morocco bilateral trade.

¶4. (U) During a recent interview, Transport Minister Karim Ghellab defended the government's actions, calling attention to Morocco's mortality trend before implementation of the 2004 plan. Between 1996 and 2003, Moroccan fatalities grew between 4-5 percent per year. According to Ghellab, without government action in 2004, Morocco was on course to suffer 4,490 fatalities in 2007, vice the actual 3,800.

New Road Legislation Will Not Be Easy

15. (SBU) Reasons for Morocco's grim statistics are varied. According to Idrissi, 80 percent of the accidents are due to human factors he characterized as "disrespect" for the law. Other factors include lack of safety awareness, road infrastructure, vehicle condition, driver training and licensing, and weather. Addressing all these factors, Ghellab announced a new plan of action on February 20, which calls for renewed public safety awareness, improvements to the road infrastructure, and implementation of a new Moroccan road code. Included in the new code are increased use of "on the spot" fines, stiffer penalties, and overhaul of vehicle registration and drivers license procedures.

16. (SBU) While everyone seems to agree something must be done, not everyone agrees the new road code is the answer. An earlier attempt to secure its passage in April 2007 inspired two major labor strikes that caused the government to withdraw it. Led by professional transport unions, but also buoyed by public support, criticism of the new code centers around its stiffer penalties and increased authority for police to issue spot fines and confiscate licenses. Heading the list of complaints are the increased fines, which detractors call inappropriate for Morocco's standard of living. Under the new law, the first level of fines would rise from 400 dirhams (USD 52) to 1,500 dirhams (USD 194). Detractors also challenge the consequences of granting traffic police (seen as one of the most corrupt entities in the country) the authority to confiscate licenses, arguing that such power would give police even more leverage to extort bribes from drivers who were at risk of losing their livelihood.

17. (SBU) Also at issue for many Moroccans is the "actual" price Moroccans will have to pay for traffic violations. Although a minor speed violation currently carries a 400 dirhams fine, in practice,

RABAT 00000280 002 OF 002

many Moroccans make only a 50-100 dirham immediate payment to the officer at the scene. In explaining the public's criticism of the new law's increased fines, one Moroccan asked, "If a 400 dirham offense actually costs 100 dirhams, how much will a 1,500 dirham offense cost?"

Disrespect, Education, and Apathy

18. (SBU) Although not everyone agrees the new road code is the right cure, there is general agreement on the disease: widespread disrespect of driving laws and conditions. According to Idrissi, disrespect of road laws, such as excessive speed, reckless driving, intoxication, and improper passing, account for 80 percent of all serious accidents. Reinforcing points made by Minister Ghellab, Idrissi emphasized increased enforcement through passage of the new road code as the key to reversing the situation. A contact in the Foreign Ministry seemed to support this view. "It's not that Moroccans don't know how to drive safely. In fact, they do so when they travel to Europe and the U.S. They drive like they do in Morocco because they can."

19. (SBU) Khalid Shimi, who runs a drivers training school in Kenitra and is the director of the Moroccan Association for Road Safety Education, agrees that disrespect of road laws is rampant. However, Shimi believes that safety awareness programs aimed at Morocco's youth hold the key to changing the current culture. Shimi's association has presented over 30 safety outreach events at local schools in the past two years, convincing Shimi that road safety should be integrated into Morocco's education system. Lamenting the number of children killed while walking to and from school, Shimi admitted giving up hope for a culture change within the current generation. Instead, he believes a new culture of safety awareness can only start with the children.

110. (SBU) No one discounts the human cost of what the Moroccan press calls the "Road War." Routinely, Moroccan TV broadcasts grisly accident scenes and grieving families. Nonetheless, in a country that seemingly embraces public demonstration as a national

pastime, public movements to stop the constant wave of accidents are nonexistent. Shimi acknowledged frustration with both government and public apathy, categorizing the whole "system" as corrupt. "Licenses are bought, not earned. The same people who cry after an accident are the same ones who paid the bribes."

¶11. (SBU) Comment: In terms of shattered human lives and lost economic opportunity, Morocco's road accidents are exacting a price the country cannot sustain. At the heart of the debate over the new road code are basic questions of trust and corruption. On the one hand, the public is reluctant to place additional trust in a traffic police force that has proven to be rife with corruption. On the other hand, the government asserts that placing more authority with police and increasing fines is the only way to change the current culture and deter disrespect of traffic laws.

¶12. (SBU) Comment Cont. While passage and implementation of the new road code will not come easily, it appears to be something Minister Ghellab is willing to stake his reputation on. Known as a reformer within the government, Ghellab was given two of the government's most controversial portfolios: port and road reform. As he did with the port reform bill in December 2006 and in breaking the transportation strike in April 2007, we look for Ghellab to negotiate pay and pension concessions with the professional transportation unions in order to gain ultimate acceptance of the new road code. End Comment.

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